

Yaqubian to carry Ontario Liberal banner in south riding



By Brock Weir

As the daughter of two Persian immigrants, Naheed Yaqubian grew up hearing that Canada was the best country in the world. You could become involved in civic life, they said, and engage in your political representatives at all levels of government by simply picking up the phone.

Unwittingly or not, her parents planted powerful seeds in Naheed's young mind, and now they are bearing fruit as the local lawyer was named the Ontario Liberal Party's nominee in Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill over the weekend.

Ms. Yaqubian was acclaimed to represent the party in Aurora's south riding at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Sunday afternoon, joined by local MP Leona Alleslev, Oak Ridges-Markham MPP Dr. Helena Jaczek and a host of party dignitaries.

"I have always been a Liberal and I have volunteered with the Liberal Party since I was a kid of 13 or 14," says Ms. Yaqubian. "Growing up, I realised the Liberal party spoke to my family and my community in a way that other parties have not until very recently. I think now we have seen other parties approach families and communities like mine to try and incentivise them to vote, but ultimately I think the Liberal Party has always stood as the party of diversity and inclusion. In that regard [becoming involved with the Liberals] was a no-brainer."

Ms. Yaqubian grew up in Oak Ridges, first attending Oak Ridges Public School and Richmond Hill High School, before moving onto McMaster University where she obtained a Honours BA in Political Science. From there, she pursued her law degree at Queen's University where she served as student body president before moving onto practice law on Bay Street with a focus on public institutions and human and labour rights.

It is her work as a labour lawyer that helped spur her to seek the local nomination.

"The Changing Workplaces Review the government brought in is of huge importance to me, having worked with Fortune 500 companies as well as tiny 'mom and pop' businesses," she says. "What we're seeing now, I think, is a levelling of the playing field. Ontario is the best it has been in a long time in terms of economic growth."

Another facet of Provincial affairs which factored in her decision to enter public life is public education. Ms. Yaqubian currently serves as chair of the York Region District School Board's Equity and Inclusivity Committee, a committee which has, in recent months, had its work cut out for it addressing a mandate from the Ministry of Education to address systemic racism and entitlement identified within the Board.

"Schools are facing incredible challenges now," she says. "We have seen global movements, both economic and otherwise that have sought to divide us and they are having an impact right here in York Region. A couple of years ago, I decided that the Equity Committee was somewhere I could lend my human rights expertise and we have been able to institute several changes I think will be of benefit to the Board, ensuring that every child feels welcome, that we're able to respond swiftly and effectively to incidents of hate we might see in our schools."

"This connective tissue relates to a broader theme of government and institutions being a force for good, but only, of course, when the right people are at the helm. That is deeply important to me."

Needless to say, Ms. Yaqubian believes the "right people" at the helm are the Liberal Party. She does not claim, however, to be

unaware that that the Liberals will face challenges in the lead up to next year's Provincial election campaign.

Residents have spoken out about rising hydro rates, local businesses have voiced their worries over a rising minimum wage, but Ms. Yaqubian says she has received a positive reception at the doors.

“Any government who has been in power for 14 years has probably done a couple of things they are not proud of, but the Ontario Liberal record has always been one of public investments and public good,” she says. “We have carried this Province through recession without raising taxes, we have had to spend a little bit more to do it, and I know there are some people who may not be happy about that, but at the end of the day Kathleen has made some tough choices that have pulled us through the recession with flying colours.

“As Liberals, we know we have seen record-breaking economic growth and we know that we have seen our economy return to not only pre-recession levels but actually higher than that, but not everyone is feeling the benefits of that and that can be a challenge at the door.”

Policies, she says, will drive that point home, ranging from pharmacare to free tuition to those who might not have the means to go to university.

“It is policies like that that give people the faith they too can be a part of society and they too can benefit from the growth we are all experiencing.”

With a Provincial election campaign expected to begin in earnest this spring, Ms. Yaqubian will face off in Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill against Progressive Conservative Michael Parsa, a Richmond Hill business owner whose family came to Canada from Iraq. The fact two people of such similar backgrounds are able to carry their respective party's banners in the riding is a testament, she says to “the Ontario Dream, the Canadian Dream,” but this is a dream “made possible by the Liberal party.”

“As a local woman, I am really excited to represent the Town and the community where I grew up,” she says. “I have skin in the game. It's my community just as much as it is anyone else, so when you're talking about transit you're talking about my GO train station, or my friend who is a single mom who needs [to get to] work and is able to do so every 15 minutes now thanks to the Liberals' policies.”